



Internal Customer Service: Getting Your Organization to Work Together

Great customer service isn't just about serving the people *outside* your company.

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Providing exceptional customer service lies at the heart of the mission of many organizations. It is the central theme of books, articles, motivational seminars and business courses. Its value is undisputed in business circles. What many companies fail to focus on, however, is the primary path to exceptional customer service: internal customer service.

Internal customer service is the service we provide fellow employees and other departments within our own organizations, as well as our suppliers and anyone else with whom we work to get our jobs done. It is what we do when a colleague asks for information she needs to complete her main task for the day; it is what we say when someone from marketing asks for the addresses of good contacts; it is how we greet the vice president of sales when he walks into our office with an "I need something from you" expression on his face.

All these things can be seen as interruptions that take us away from our "real" jobs, yet they are vital to our company's success. If you see a gap between your "real" job and the needs of others in your organization, you need to rethink what your real job is. In helping others in your company, you help your company succeed. Superior internal customer service improves morale, productivity, employee retention, external customer service and, ultimately, profitability. As Arthur M. Blank, co-founder of Home Depot and owner of the recently acquired Atlanta Falcons football team said in his keynote at the Metro Atlanta Chamber of Commerce's Small Business Person of the Year Award luncheon, caring for your "associates" is fundamental to caring for your customers and shareholders.

Here are some tips for creating an atmosphere of sharing and helping:

1. Begin with your own perspective: Regard fellow employees and other departments as your customers. Understand that helping your colleagues do their jobs more successfully helps your organization and you. Therefore they are your customers. Treat them like VIPs.

2. View interruptions not as nuisances, but as opportunities to serve your internal customers. If you tend to view every interruption as a pothole in your road to success, reexamine those interruptions. If someone interrupts you to share gossip, that's a pothole. If someone interrupts you to ask for sales figures she needs to analyze sales team performance, that's a necessary lane change that will get your company closer to its destination. Learn to identify every real need from a colleague as a "necessary lane change," and think of every "necessary lane change" as an opportunity to move your organization closer to its goals. Take pride in helping your colleagues; enjoy your role in sharing information and providing services that help others get their jobs done. In most cases, your willingness to help others get their jobs done will lead them to readily assist you when you need it.

3. Exceed your internal customers' expectations. When someone exceeds your expectations, how do you feel? Most people feel delighted, excited, upbeat and very, very positive about that person and his or her organization. Think what you can accomplish in your organization by exceeding the expectations of fellow employees. If payroll asks for time sheets by 3 p.m., provide them by 1 p.m. so payroll can relax, knowing they have the time

sheets in hand. If human resources asks for a list of important points to cover in an employee orientation, take time to think about it and provide a thorough list of what you would want to know if you were being introduced to a new job and company.

4. Say thank you. A simple, genuine "thank you" goes much farther to create an atmosphere of sharing and helping than two such small words would suggest. Even when it is a person's job to provide information or a product to you, tell them "thank you" when they have done it. Express your appreciation of their timeliness in providing it. Explain how it has made your job much easier. Show them your delight when they exceed your expectations.